

'Via Crucis' behind-the-scenes

There's a lot the congregation doesn't see at St. Anthony's Lenten pageant

By Joseph Ryan
Assistant editor

WILMINGTON — Ash Wednesday night inside St. Anthony Church the 49th production of "Via Crucis" ("Way of the Cross") proceeds in its time-honored style. Children, teens and young adults silently perform Christ's entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, his trial and the Stations of the Cross on platforms built in the church's sanctuary, while a narrator recites the Passion story accompanied by sacred music.

**PHOTOS
BY
DON
BLAKE,
THE
DIALOG**

But what the hundreds of people in the congregation who are engrossed in the pageant don't see is how some 200 cast members and volunteers are working to keep the Lenten meditation running smoothly.

Last week, The Dialog got a "backstage pass" for the opening of 2009's "Via Crucis" and met some of the volunteers who have kept the show going since 1961, when the parish tradition was revived with this production written by Dorothy Arthur and produced by Father Roberto Balducelli.

Family tradition

Before "Via Crucis" begins, Barbara DelleDonne, who runs the costume committee with Dolly Senghaas, is helping girls put on their robes in the rectory basement. "We have some original costumes from 49 years ago," she says. "Every year we try to replenish; things start to dry rot after awhile."

DelleDonne knows her way around "Via Crucis." She participated in the pageant "a hundred years ago" and is seeing her family's fourth generation perform, her 4-year-old great-granddaughter Giovanna, who plays one of the sick children.

Family ties are strong in the show. This year's program reveals 26 surnames shared by two or more members in the cast of about 120.

Both of this year's Marys attend the opening, but it's Molly Leach, already in her blue robe, who's the Blessed Mother for the first performance. She'll split performances on alternate weeks with Chloe Runco, a 13-year "Via Crucis" veteran. Other leads, such as Jesus (Matt Casale, Tim DiVincenzo) and Mary Magdalen (Samantha Martone, Christina Roach), are also shared.

Leach, 17, travels 45 minutes from Oxford, Pa., where she's home-schooled, to take part in "Via Crucis." She's done that for



Dolly Senghaas assists John Dawyot, 17, with his costume before the Ash Wednesday opening of the 49th Via Crucis at St. Anthony of Padua Church. Nearly 200 cast members and volunteers ensure a smooth performance of the Passion story.



At the St. Anthony School gym, Michele Rizzo helps cast members like Vincent Vella, 12, get ready for the evening.

about 12 years, she says, since her family first saw a performance and enjoyed the attention-grabbing nature of the living stations.

Julia Fedor also learned about St. Anthony's tradition of welcoming performers from beyond the parish's boundaries, so on Ash Wednesday she was dropping off her daughter Grace, a first-grader at Holy Angels in Newark, for the show.

Epic production values

The Roman soldiers in "Via Crucis" get into uniform in a basement utility-locker room crammed with costume racks.

Dolly Senghaas and two cos-

tume committee members help the boys adjust their uniforms. Years ago, Father Balducelli caded the realistic costumes from the producers of the 1959 Oscar-winning epic "Ben-Hur."

Senghaas' friends say she's been involved in 45 productions but the 57-year member of the parish only admits to being "pretty active" in 25 to 35 of them.

"I do costumes. I make them and sew them up," Senghaas says. "My lady friend here is helping me with it because my machine broke!"

Joe Turk, a Salesianum sophomore, is already in his centurion garb. He says he devotes nights in Lent to the church because it's



Samantha Reid and Jacquelyn Kepley join the cast in prayer before a recent rehearsal.

"given me a lot of stuff over the years and helped shape who I am."

In the gym, it's 7:20 p.m. "Via Crucis" begins in 10 minutes, so Michele Rizzo blows her ref's whistle to get the boys' attention away from the basketball they've been playing and on to

their performance.

"Guys, line up," she announces. "Come on guys, two by two, let's go."

Rizzo and other adult volunteers then lead the boys in an Our Father before giving them some

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Costumed cast members unwind with some basketball at St. Anthony School before heading to the church for the Ash Wednesday show. At 7:20 p.m., 10 minutes before the performance begins, the game ends and the adult volunteers get the children's attention back on "Via Crucis" with some last-minute instructions and recitation of the Our Father.



Four-year-old Louie Pedicone receives reassurance from his mother, Aleta (right), and volunteer Michele Rizzo.

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last-minute advice. "Listen to me. We're walking over. It's cold; walk fast, no running. No yelling."

Judas is nervous

Once "Via Crucis" begins, Maria G. Finamore, who has directed the pageant for five years with the help of four associates, watches calmly. Mark Blaschke accompanies the choir on the organ. Matt Jackson runs lights. Bob Murray collects palms from the children of Jerusalem as they exit. The producer, Father Balducelli, appears everywhere — in the pews, in the dark sacristy watching a TV monitor, and outlined in a spotlight at the sacristy door catching sight of the production from the wings.

Finamore has one concern. Judas, played by Vinny Panella,

was nervous going on. The "original" Judas had to miss the last rehearsal and opening night, so Panella, a Springer Middle School student, volunteered to step in. He performed well at rehearsal, Finamore says.

"The only thing he didn't know how to do was hang himself. So Mr. Murray over there says, 'Come on, let's practice hanging ourselves.' He'll be fine. Once they put the costumes on, they know where to go and what to do."

That familiarity comes after rehearsals once a week from early January until the week before Lent.

"Where else can you go that brings 125 to 150 kids and their parents to church on Friday night?" Finamore asks. "And you don't have to argue with them to do it."

At the end of "Via Crucis," Matt Casale reflects on portraying Christ. "I felt nervous, but I talked to Father Roberto and he told me to just think like I'm



Children head to the church as the pageant's opening nears.

Jesus, put myself in that situation and everything will be all right. That made me feel comfortable."

In church, the congregation is now receiving ashes. Perhaps the pageant is affecting them the same way it did Casale.

"It made me see what Jesus went through," he says. "It gives me a new perspective on my faith."

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